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SUBJECT: SE TURKEY FLOODING PUTS PM ERDOGAN IN HOT WATER

ADANA 00000239 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The worst flooding in Turkey since 1937 has caused serious damage in the underdeveloped Southeast, killing at least 40 people and leaving tens of thousands homeless. While the GOT has mobilized local military assets and promised assistance to the victims, PM Erdogan's hands-off approach has angered many in the region and exposed him to criticism by opposition parties. Even if the GOT regains its footing and provides needed support to the victims, people in the predominantly Kurdish SE are likely to see Erdogan's characterization of the disaster as "exaggerated" as proof that Ankara still views them as second-class citizens. End summary.

Deluge Batters Vulnerable SE

¶2. (U) Heavy rains across Turkey in the first week of November have caused the worst flooding in the poor, mountainous and predominantly Kurdish southeastern provinces of Diyarbakir, Sanliurfa, Batman, Mardin, Siirt, Sirnak and Hakkari. Red Crescent's website reported on November 8 that the death toll from the flooding was 36, with 5760 people left homeless. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) reported a death toll of 40. Because of shoddy construction, ageing infrastructure and overcrowding, natural disasters in this region exact a heavier toll; many of those killed were in vehicles that were swept off roads or on bridges that collapsed.

¶3. (SBU) The Turkish Red Crescent Headquarters in Ankara told us that they sent food and shelter to the region, opened donation accounts in banks, and that the situation was "under control." Their office in Diyarbakir declined to comment on the current situation in the SE, or to provide us with numbers of injured and dead, referring us to their website instead.

¶4. (U) The Turkish military is assisting with search-and-rescue teams and other logistical support and the central government is using state buildings for shelter and providing food. In addition, many municipalities controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) have also established crisis centers to cope with the emergency.

PM Erdogan: Callous or Misinformed?

¶5. (SBU) PM Erdogan has appeared disengaged from the crisis. The government has sent ministerial delegations and MPs to the region, but Erdogan did not speak publicly about the crisis until Saturday, when he commented on the media coverage, stating

that "There are certain exaggerations, which sadden us. You cannot stop such natural disasters even in the most developed countries of the world." On November 7, Energy Minister Guler and three other ministers were dispatched to the region to meet with flood victims.

¶6. (SBU) In conversations with Consulate Adana, civic leaders in the region have condemned the Prime Minister, saying that his attitude would probably be different if his own relatives and property had been affected. One contact in Silopi, a town on the Iraqi border that lost 250 houses, characterized the PM's statement as "nonsense." A contact in Diyarbakir said that, although nobody is taking to the streets to protest, there is deep anger about the PM's statement. Others noted that, if the PM declared the region a disaster zone, the provinces would be granted additional resources to cope with the aftermath of the flood. One DTP official told us that the central government was refusing to make the disaster declaration because it would make funds available to DTP-controlled municipalities. Anatolian News Agency reported on November 7 that the opposition CHP introduced a bill declaring 13 SE cities disaster areas.

¶7. (SBU) Shahismail Bedirhanoglu, President of GUNSIAD, a group representing businesses in the SE, said that the PM must have received inaccurate information to have made a statement so at odds with reality. He said that a coalition of 30 NGOs in Diyarbakir is working to assess the damage and coordinate relief activities. He said they estimate that 10,000 homes have been washed away and 80,000 people are now homeless. A group of NGOs has also called on the GOT to declare the region a disaster zone.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) While the GOT's actions in response to the emergency appear to be serious (particularly in light of the challenging conditions in the region), its public presentation has provided fuel to PM Erdogan's national opposition and angered locals who expected more from Ankara. The PM's ill-advised comments and his reluctance to declare the region a disaster zone will

ADANA 00000239 002.2 OF 002

further erode trust between the GOT and Turkey's Kurds, many of whom believe that Ankara regards them as second-class citizens.
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